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ABSTRACT

College students' preferences for childbearing and timing of childbearing were investigated with a socialization approach. Specifically investigated were two questions: Are unmarried males and females similar in their attitudes toward desired family size and preferred age at first birth? Do similar factors influence male and female attitudes? To assess whether similar factors are influencing attitudes, the study applied a conceptual framework for fertility socialization. Data were obtained from a questionnaire mailed to a random sample of undergraduate students attending a moderate-sized, public university; 77 males and 144 females returned the questionnaire. Results supported the hypothesis that there were no differences between males and females in desired family size and preferred age at first birth. The analysis also supported the fertility socialization approach and generally similar factors predicted family size and preferred age at first birth for males and females. Although there were no significant differences, the slightly smaller family size desired by males emphasizes the need to focus on the male role in decision-making. Both males and females preferred to have their first child at around 27 years of age. It was concluded that the socialization approach toward childbearing had proven especially useful in identifying specific values about fertility which form the basis for decision-making. (Author/RH)

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College Students' Preferences for Childbearing and Timing of Childbearing

by

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ABSTRACT

College Students Preferences for Childbearing and Timing of Childbearing

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College students preferences for childbearing and timing of childbearing were investigated using a socialization approach. Specifically, the research was guided by two questions. Are unmarried males and females similar in their attitudes toward desired family size and preferred age at first birth? Do similar factors influence male and female attitudes? To assess whether similar factors are influencing attitudes, the study applied the conceptual framework on fertility socialization developed by Fox, Fox, and Frodhardt-Lane.

Data were obtained from a questionnaire mailed to a random sample of undergraduate students, 77 males and 144 females returned the questionnaire, at a moderate-sized, public university. An analysis of the nonrespondents indicated males were slightly less likely to respond.

The results supported the hypothesis that there were no differences between males and females in desired family size and preferred age at first birth. The analysis also supported the fertility socialization approach and generally similar factors predicted desired family size and age at first birth for males and females. Although there were no significant differences, the slightly smaller family size desired by males emphasizes the need to focus on the male role in decision-making. Both males and females preferred to have their first child around 27 years of age. Unless the tendency for males to marry females who are slightly younger changes, the issue of timing of childbearing and how couples negotiate differences is very important. The issue of timing of childbearing needs to be addressed by educators, counselors, and researchers.

Research on childbearing expectations has shown a decline in the expected number of children by young wives 18-24 in the last two decades from 2.9 births in 1967 to 2.1 in 1982 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1979, 1982). Median age at first birth also has increased substantially from 21.8 in 1961 to 22.3 in 1974 (Gibson, 1976). Ideal age at first birth also has risen from 22.0 for women married between 1951 and 1955 to 22.6 for women married between 1971 and 1975 (Pebley, 1981). Campbell (1981) and Oakley (1981) have noted that one of the limitations of the bulk of research on childbearing expectations as illustrated by the above statistics is the focus on married women. Recently, research has begun to study the expectations of single women (Hirsch et al, 1981, Fox et al 1982).

With rare exceptions, fertility research has neglected the male role (Scanzoni, 1975, 1976 and Wicks and Workman, 1978). In their review of the male role in fertility decision-making, Rosen and Benson (1982) conclude that males desire and actively particiapte in childbearing decisions. Marciano (1979) found evidence of the dominance of the male preferences for childbearing. Rosen and Benson (1982) believe that one of the main reasons for the neglect of the male is the cultural bias which assumes the male's role is less important in parenting decisions.

This paper responds to the challenge for research on the childbearing expectations of young, unmarried, males and females. The purpose of this paper is to examine unmarried males and females attitudes toward childbearing, particularly whether males and females are socialized to have similar attitudes toward desired family size and timing of childbearing. Specifically, the paper will test the hypothesis that there are no differences between males and females in their desired family size and timing of childbearing and the factors which influence their preferences.

The questions guiding the research are: 1) Are unmarried males and females similar in their attitudes toward desired family size and timing of childbearing? 2) Do similar factors influence male and female attitudes toward desired family size and timing of childbearing?

Childbearing is now seen as a complex, dynamic process of socialization. Children through exposure to many socializing agents develop specific attitudes toward childbearing such as family size and timing of childbearing. These attitudes are continuously challenged and either reinforced or modified throughout the reproductive years. These attitudes form the basis for communicating and actual decision-making about the number of children and whento have them. A continuous socialization approach to childbearing has been described by Fox et al, 1982, Philliber, 1980a and 1980b, Houseknecht, 1979, and Gustavas and Nam, 1970).

It is a common assumption that males and females are socialized differently in our society. Males and females receive different rewards and costs for behavior and are canalized toward the appropriate behavior for their gender as defined by society. Several forces in recent years such as the women's movement, self-actualization movement, and changes in employment have contributed to changes in attitudes toward sex roles. In the last decade, research on sex-role attitudes have documented a shift toward equalitarian roles for males and females (Scanzoni and Fox, 1980; Cherlin and Walters, 1981). This shift in attitudes toward sex roles is consistent with the proposition that males and females are now socialized to have similar attitudes toward childbearing.

The second focus of this research is on the factors influencing childbearing attitudes. The best conceptual framework to date for identifying the socialization variables influencing childbearing is the model of fertility socialization developed by Fox et al (1982). The model identifies five clusters of variables that influence

fertility attitudes and behavior. Societal variables focus on social origin or cultural variables which describe general patterns of socialization embodying specific values. Family-of-origin variables focus on the family's transmission of values divided into parent effects, sibling effects, parent-child effects, and general structure and climate. Institutional context variables focus on external socializing agents such as memberships and associations in church, school, work, and the influence of the media. Interpersonal variables focus on the influence of relationships such as peers, friendships, dating, and marital. The last cluster personal attributes focus on future plans, sex-role preferences, sexual standards and personality traits. For fertility attitudes, Fox et al propose that social origin and family variables are initially a greater determinant of fertility values which are then either modified for reinforced by other socializing agents. Socialization for fertility is viewed as a continuous process toward specific values influencing decision-making and subsequent behavior. Their data supported the overall model and the importance of social origin and family-of-origin variables for fertility attitudes. This study will test their model using data drawn from a sample of unmarried males and females.

Method

The respondents were a random sample of undergraduate college students, 77 males and 144 females, at a moderate-sized, public university. Self-administered questionnaires were sent to a random sample of students. To ensure an adequate response rate a second wave reminader, and a third wave including the questionnaire were sent. The response rate was 55 percent. An analysis of the nonrespondents indicated males were slightly less likely to reply.

Studying the childbearing preferences of college students has advantages for illuminating a segment of future fertility trends. Two of the important changes currently affecting fertility patterns are timing of childbearing and

childlessness. College students are in the 18-24 year old age group who have most of their reproductive years ahead of them. This age group has been identified by Moore and O'Connell (1978) as the most important in the analysis of birth expectations. College students are expected to share many of the socioeconomic characteristics of voluntary childless couples: later age at first marriage, college education, and employment of husbands and wives in high income positions (Veevers, 1979). According to Mosher and Bachrach (1982) one of the pivotal groups which will influence future fertility patterns is the behavior of the temporary childless (women who have had no births but who expect to at some future time). The temporary childless in their national sample were similar to the voluntary childless in education, employment, and family income, but were disssimilar in religious preferences and religiosity. Therefore, college students are an important segment of the population to study for their childbearing preferences.

Dependent Variables

Two dependent variables were chosen for study, desired family size and timing of childbearing. Desired family size was measured by the question, how many children would you like to have. Timing of childbearing was measured by the question at what age would you like to have your first child. The reason for this choice is the recent documented changes for married women and the potential contributions these variables have on future fertility patterns.

Independent Variables

The independent variables represent the five clusters in the Fox et al model (1982). Gender, religious preference, and age indicate social origin variables whose meaning is derived from broad cultural patterns. The family-of-origin variables selected were the mother's and father's education, and the number of siblings. The institutional context of socialization was indicated

by religiosity. The interpersonal by year in school. Personal attributes were measured by a question for desired age at marriage and attitude scales. Sex-role attitudes were measured by Arnott's Autonomy for Women Scale (1972) and the Women's Work Scale developed for the National Longitudinal Surve- of Women. General attitudes toward parenthood were measured by Fisher's Unconventional Parenthood Scale (1972) and Blake's Childlessness Scale (1979). The scales reflecting general parenthood attitudes were selected because they indicate values about the role of children in a person's future life plans.

Data Analysis

There were two steps in the analysis. First, the analysis compared the preferences for family size and age at birth of the first child to test whether there were differences between males and females. In the second step, the independent variables were regressed on the two dependent variables using forward stepwise regression. Separate regression analyses were performed for males and females.

Results

Analysis of variance showed that there were no significant differences in desired family size for males and females. Mean desired family size was 2.5 for males and 2.6 for females. The results provide evidence to support the null hypothesis. It is interesting to note that the desired family size was slightly smaller for males than females. Female's desired family size is similar to the desired family size of young white women (2.8 in 1971 and 2.6 in 1976) found by Hirsch, Seltzer, and Zelnick (1981). The slight discrepancy between male and female desired family size was similar to the finding by Scanzoni (p. 211, 1975) that husband's desired number of children was slightly lower than their wives.

Analysis of variance showed that there was no significant difference in

preferred age at first birth for males and females. Mean preferred age at first birth was 27.2 for males and 27.0 for females. The hypothesis of no difference was supported. Although there was no difference between males and females, the results suggest the need for further research to examine the influence of the difference in age of the couple and its influence on decision-making. Statistics still indicate that males are slightly older than females at marriage. Thus, there appears to be a need for more compromise on the issue of timing of childbearing since a large proportion of married couples would not be similar in age.

Tables 1 and 2 present the stepwise regression for desired family size for males and females respectively. For both males and females, variables representing three clusters: societal, personal attributes, and family-of-origin were important predictors of desired family size, lending support to the model. For males, the single strongest predictor was their attitude toward parenthood. The next in importance was the number of siblings. For females, the single strongest predictor was being catholic. The next strongest predictor was age.

Tables 3 and 4 present the stepwise regression for preferred age at first birth for males and females respectively. For both males and females, variables representing personal attributes and societal context were the most important predictors. The strongest predictor for both males and females was preferred age at marriage. the male's attitudes toward parenthood and the role of women were the next strongest predictors. For females, the next strongest predictors were their attitude towards autonomy for women and being catholic. The importance of age at marriage in predicting timing of childbearing indicates that males and females have internalized the value that marriage must precede childbearing.

The regression analysis supports the Fox et al (1982) model but indicates that some components are more important than others in predicting the two

TABLE 1 Stepwise Regression Male's Preferred Family Size

Variable	B	Beta	r
Fisher Scale	- .62	- .29	- .43
Number Siblings	.12	.26	.40
Arnott Scale	- .32	- .21	- .40
Catholic	.70	.42	.35
Protestant	.34	.21	- .04

Multiple R 0.66

R^2 0.42

TABLE 2 Stepwise Regression Female's Preferred Family Size

Variables	B	Beta	r
Catholic	.92	.37	.35
Age	- .24	-..36	- .18
Number Siblings	.17	.23	.34
Mother's Education	.85	.17	.19
Arnott Scale	- .18	- .10	- .08

Multiple R 0.53

R^2 0.28

TABLE 3 Stepwise Regression Male's Preferred Age at First Birth

Variables	B	Beta	r
Prefer Age Marriage	0.77	0.66	0.68
Blake Scale	.13	.18	.18
Women Work Scale	- .72	- .14	.04
Arnott Scale	.62	.15	.26
Father's Education	- .12	- .15	.02

Multiple R 0.71

R^2 0.50

TABLE 4 Stepwise Regression Female's Preferred Age at First Birth

Variables	B	Beta	r
Prefer Age Marriage	.79	.81	.82
Arnott Scale	.39	.12	.35
Catholic	- .16	- .04	.05
Blake Scale	.39	.06	.21
School Year	.27	.17	.18

Multiple R 0.84

R^2 0.70

dimensions of family size and age at first birth. Family-of-origin and societal variables were more influential in predicting family size. On the other hand, personal attributes were more influential in predicting age at first birth.

The emergence of societal variables as stronger predictors for female's desired family size and preferred age at first birth suggests that while homogeneous values are being inculcated in young, unmarried adults, the process and sensitivity to various socialization agents differ.

Summary and Implications

The study examined unmarried male and female preferences for childbearing using a socialization approach. The results supported the hypothesis that there were no differences between males and females in desired family size and preferred age at first birth. Although there were no significant differences, the slightly smaller family size preferred by males emphasizes the need for research to focus on the male's role in decision-making about the number of children. The issue of timing of childbearing may be more important in actual decision-making by couples than family size. Both males and females in this study preferred to have their first child around 27 years of age although females preferred age at marriage was 24.4 and males 25.1. Unless the tendency for males to marry females who are slightly younger changes, more negotiation regarding when to have the first child would seem to be required.

The second question whether similar factors influence childbearing attitudes for males and females is harder to answer. For desired family size, two variables being catholic and number of siblings were important predictors for both males and females. However, the strongest single predictor for males was their attitude toward parenthood whereas for females the strongest single predictor was being catholic. This suggests that females and males differ in their sensitivity to socializing agents. Future theory development should seek to explain why

the impact of socializing agents differ.

A greater similarity exists in the factors influencing preferred age at first birth. The strongest, single predictor for both males and females is preferred age at marriage. Personal attributes towards the role of women and parenthood were the other important predictors. Thus, the influence of specific socializing agents seems to be connected to the specific dimension of childbearing.

The study provides support for the Fox, Fox, Frohardt-Lane model of fertility socialization and suggests ways to refine the model. The results suggest that the model be elaborated to specify the mechanisms by which individuals are sensitiveto different socializing agents or why the impact of socializing agents differ. The stronger influence of societal variables in predicting female's desired family size and age at first birth suggests that females are subtlely conditioned to attend to the values of external agents. The greater influence of personal attributes for males suggests that males to some extent are still socialized to be more independent and to determine their own future. What effect does this difference in the socialization process have on the actual decision-making about childbearing? Family-of- origin variables were more influential in determining family size than timing of childbearing. Research on value transmission from parent to child has found that there is greater agreement and influence for values which are concrete, visible, and of lasting concern to parents (Hoge,Petrillo, and Smith, 1982; Smith, 1982). One way of refining the model would be to explain the importance of the clusters of socializing agent by the degree of concreteness and lasting concern of the childbearing attitude. In the present study, desired family size is more concrete and of concern to parents while timing of childbearing is less visible and probably of less importance to parents. This is not to say that families have no influence on timing of childbearing but that the influence may be less pervasive

than other agents or indirect through attitudes toward life roles.

A socialization approach toward childbearing has proven useful in this examination of the childbearing preferences of unmarried males and females, especially in identifying specific values about fertility which form the basis for actual decision-making. Further development of the socialization approach needs to explain why the impact of socializing agents differ for men and women or why males and females are sensitive to various socializing agents.

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